Getting Noticed (June 2005)

In his poetry Matthew Arnold deals with abandonment in a way which struck me, at least, as un-Victorian. His speakers rage against the perpetrators; the fault is with them, not with the speakers. But Arnold settled on a different reaction to abandonment and isolation as he "matured": re-union, a desired community, he decided, *can* be created, so long as the critic/poet remains resolutely faithful and good. But fascinatingly, other poets in the Victorian era suggest through their works that they think abandoning parents are drawn mostly to acts of misbehavior, not to notable instances of right-thinking, pure intentions, or good works. Specifically, we can look to works such as Robert Browning's "Caliban Upon Setebos" and Edward Fitzgerald's "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám," for evidence that at least some notable Victorians understood that gods (and other parental figures) are most quick to attend to their flock when they spot them out in blatant acts of disobeyance.

Several of Matthew Arnold's poems argue that abandonment, a fracture of a wonderful community, is effected by willfully negligent, blameworthy others. In "The Forsaken Merman," for example, a mother's children desire nothing more than her return and the renewal of her attention. They are "wild with pain" (16), and try and convince themselves that "[s]urely she will come again!" (17). But the merman knows "[s]he will not come" (28), that she has decided not to—too much fun to be had indulging in surface "joy[s]" (95)! The children are in pain; the merman is both pained *and* angry. He deems his wife "cruel" for abandoning forever "[t]he kings of the sea" (144). Angry, too, is the speaker of Arnold's poem, "To Marguerite—Continued." The speaker of this poem rages at "[a] God" (22) who seems to have isolated him out of cruelty: "Who ordered that their longing's fire / Should be as soon as kindled, cooled?" (19-20). But upon maturing as an essayist Arnold no longer uses his craft to rage at others' flaws; instead, he is an ascetic who admonishes himself to question his own worth and righteousness—that is, someone who must learn to "banish from his mind all feelings of contradiction, and irritation, and impatience" ("Preface to the first edition of poems" 1278). The Arnold whose speaker in "To Marguerite" castigated such a formidable figure as God for restricting the pleasure offered to man, became the man who in his "Preface to the first Edition of Poems" praised other reified personages—the ancients—for their "severe and scrupulous self-restraint"

(1276). The Arnold who granted his speaker such authority in his declamation of God, who did not make him (i.e., the speaker) seem inappropriately ungrateful or possessed of limited intellectual reach, became the pious essayist who reifies Elders as being the only ones qualified to see things in their entirety: according to Arnold, the ancients could "regard the whole," while he and his generation could but "regard the parts" (1273).

Arnold writes that the critic who desires a community united in contemplation of great thoughts and deeds will "at last convince even the practical man of his sincerity" ("The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" 1300) through speaking Truth rather than falsehood. Because he ultimately chose to believe that a determined, resolute effort to bring people together would attract notice, he moves away from embracing the possibility raised in "Merman" that however much one "c[alls]" (15), however "dear" (14), however right one's voice, one will never be heard.

I am surely not alone in thinking Arnold become an advocate for "right behavior" because it helped him understand his fate as in his control, and because it permitted him to drop the disturbing consideration of God (and existence) as intrinsically brutal. His first stance was the braver one, however, but he could not sustain the more difficult worldview. For the same reason, the Robert Browning who wrote "Caliban Upon Setebos" is to be preferred over the Browning who wrote "Rabbi Ben Ezra." "Rabbi" seems very Victorian in the way Matthew Sweet argues contemporaries (that is, ourselves) prefer to imagine the age: that is, as "religiose" and "puritanical." We find in this poem a mind at work that would transform any misfortune, any reason for doubting whether one is cared for or lovingly attended to by God, as an opportunity to demonstrate one's faith and good character. We sense in "Rabbi" a Browning similar to the Tennyson in "In Memoriam," the poem *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* rightly judges as one where "the poet's hard-won religious faith finally triumphs over science-induced despair" (1016). We sense someone who could not in the end handle either the consideration that God may not exist, or that he exists but may not in fact be beneficent, and so settled on an optimistic, edifying stance—that is, someone like Edmund Gosse's father, whom Gosse described as one who "took one step in the service of truth, and then [. . .] drew back in an agony, and accepted the servitude of error" (*Norton* 1344).

But Browning *was* capable of engaging the latter possibility in his poetry.

However, he does so through a speaker—Caliban—that ensures his point of view could subsequently readily be dismissed (by him, by others) as corrupt and wrong-minded. Walter Bagehot, in "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning," characterizes Caliban as an "incongruous" (1316) mind. According to him, Caliban certainly is not someone who should be understood as espousing a point of view which is "in [Browning] [. . .] but not *peculiar*" (1310) to him, that is, a point of view universally shared by all men. *The Norton Anthology of Literature* essentially agrees with Bagehot's assessment of Browning's motives, arguing that Browning shows how "the mind of a primitive creature may operate" (986), i.e., not how *Browning's* mind at some level operated. Though it is disappointing to discover that, even today, many critics prefer to imagine Caliban as Browning's example of a despicable manner in which to participate in and construe the world, in truth, Caliban expresses some of the same rage at a seemingly non-benign deity who cares little for his creations that the "proto-typical" Victorian Matthew Arnold expresses in his earlier poetry. Both Caliban and the speaker of "To Marguerite" look to God's craftsmanship, to his created world, to establish His character. Caliban understands that Setebos could and would have made life better for his creatures had he not desired to fashion them so they were forced by their limitations to attend to and worship him: "This blinded beast / Loves whose places flesh-meat on his nose" (181-82). The speaker of "To Marguerite" also realizes that God could have made the world without the seas that forced the separation of man from man. In both poems "God" is portrayed as a malicious entity: he does not "exercise [his craft] [. . .] / [. . .] for the love of what is worked" (188).

But Caliban would at least appreciate Arnold's concern to become more pious and ascetic as he aged. After all, while Caliban could only brave a harsh critique of his god while hidden "under holes" (267), Arnold did so through a speaker who would be taken by most to be Arnold himself. Caliban, too, when discussing what he would do if he were overheard, admits he would react by trying to "appease Him" (272) in some way. Though he imagines sacrificing parts of himself—or the entirety of others—to do so, a move toward pious reverence would certainly be something Caliban would consider. But he wouldn't deem it a strategy which would *necessarily* appease His wrath, for Caliban knows God to despise most especially those who think they have him figured out: "Repeat what act has pleased. He may grow wroth" (224). According to Caliban, finding means to avoid or appease God is a difficult task. It is in fact life's primary "sport: discover how or die!" (218).

There is a sense in "Caliban," however, that being good *is* means to escape His wrath, for the poem ends with Setebos' vengeance being visited upon him for airing disrespectful thoughts. However, we should note that if Caliban's primary irritation with God was His lack of interest in him (and it might well be: we note that he is well aware of how Setebos "favours Prosper, who knows why?" [203]), unconsciously he might have hoped to be overheard so to obtain much desired attention. Like a deprived child comes to sense as he acts up as if spoiled, he may have come to know that being thought of in anger is to be preferred over not being thought of at all.

One wonders if some Victorian poets wrote in hopes of inviting upon themselves the wrath and disapproval of their society's social censors. In Edward Fitzgerald's "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám," the speaker presents a creator who may not be malicious but who cannot be impressed by any one human soul. He proclaims that "[t]he Eternal Sáki from the Bowl has poured / Millions of Bubbles like us, and will pour" (184) more. The personified world "heeds" "our Coming and Departure" / "As the Sea's self should heed a pebble-cast" (187-88). He capitalizes "Coming" and "Departure" to convey our own preferred sense that our presence in the world mean something, that it *should* mean something, to He who begat it. But though Fitzgerald portrays God as insensitive to small disturbances, there is a sense in the poem, as there is in "Caliban," that *blaspheme* can be counted upon to draw the attention and ire of gods. Caliban's God (Setebos) is forever on the lookout for those who would either dare critique Him or "who seem too happy" (258). And just as a raven, an agent of Setebos, of God, appears immediately after Caliban registers his compliants, in "Rubáiyát" "[t]he little Moon looked in that all were seeking" (357) "while the Vessels one by one were speaking" (356). (Note: In reference to the moon, Fitzgerald writes: "'[a]t the close of the Fasting Month, Ramazán . . . the first Glimpse of the new Moon . . . is looked for with the utmost Anxiety'" [*Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry* 155].) There is a sense in both poems, then, that the best means to attract notice is to be bad. We note that the speaker in "Rubáiyát" articulates his preference to be visited upon by God, under any circumstance, than to remain alone:

> And this I know: whether the one True Light
> Kindle to Love, or Wrath—consume me quite.
> One Flash of It within the Tavern caught
> Better than in the Temple lost outright. (305-09)

Fitzgerald attracted intense irate attention through making known his belief that we should praise, not fear, "the grape" (361)—the indulgent life—for we know that Browning composed "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in order to refute Fitzgerald's speaker's point of view. Perhaps, too, poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti unconsciously wrote their sensuous verse hoping to attract the attention of a parental censor. If the speaker of "Jenny" is meant to represent Rossetti, he certainly felt guilt-ridden and shameful, and anticipated a moment of ultimate "[j]udgement" (218). Maybe Rossetti wrote a poem in which he admits to sharing the prostitute's sinfulness ("And must I mock you to the last, / Ashamed of my own shame" [383-84]), hoping he would be punished for not sufficiently "reck[ing] [God's] [. . .] rod" (Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" 4). It might seem strange to suggest Rossetti wrote some of his verse actually *hoping* to provoke the sort of angry, mean-spirited attack he ended up receiving by critics like Robert Buchanan, but as Julia Saville argues in *A Queer Chivalry*, "literal flagellation in the nineteenth century earned the designation 'the English vice'" (153). Punishment, according to Saville, brings pleasure to the masochist, because it draws out a "realization [of a desired] [. . .] union" (156)—that is, because it serves as clear evidence that one is desired by, still matters to, still very much needed parental figures.

Though the Victorian age is typically thought of as one that had to come to terms with how God and the natural world were being pushed further and further apart, we note that a good many of its poets still preferred to imagine the world's unpleasantness as being effected—whether for good or ill—by an intending Other (i.e., God). Because they insisted on believing He was still "out there," however distant, to breach back into intimacy, they enabled their hope they might secure His attendance if they behaved in just the right way. Some, such as Arnold, followed the prescribed path for notable artisans, the one English poets as far back as Chaucer followed, in either trying to produce pious work later in their life or distancing themselves from work they did in their youth. Many others, however, decided the best way to catch His eye was to live a life that was sure to earn the intolerant Censor's lash.

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